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Economic, Social, and Moral Imperatives of Early Care and Education: Understanding the National Context and Finding Solutions

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> *While being interviewed for a study about how student-parents in higher education manage childcare needs, a young woman described her situation. She has two young children who attend childcare at the community college she attends. She takes two buses to get to the childcare center. When she must attend classes while childcare is not in session and her husband is working, she goes through her neighborhood asking who can help. When the children tell her at the end of the day that "bad things" happened at the neighbors', she goes through the neighborhood again in search of care for her children.* (Karp, Lugo, Magaña, Nieves, Rodriguez & Veloz, 2012)

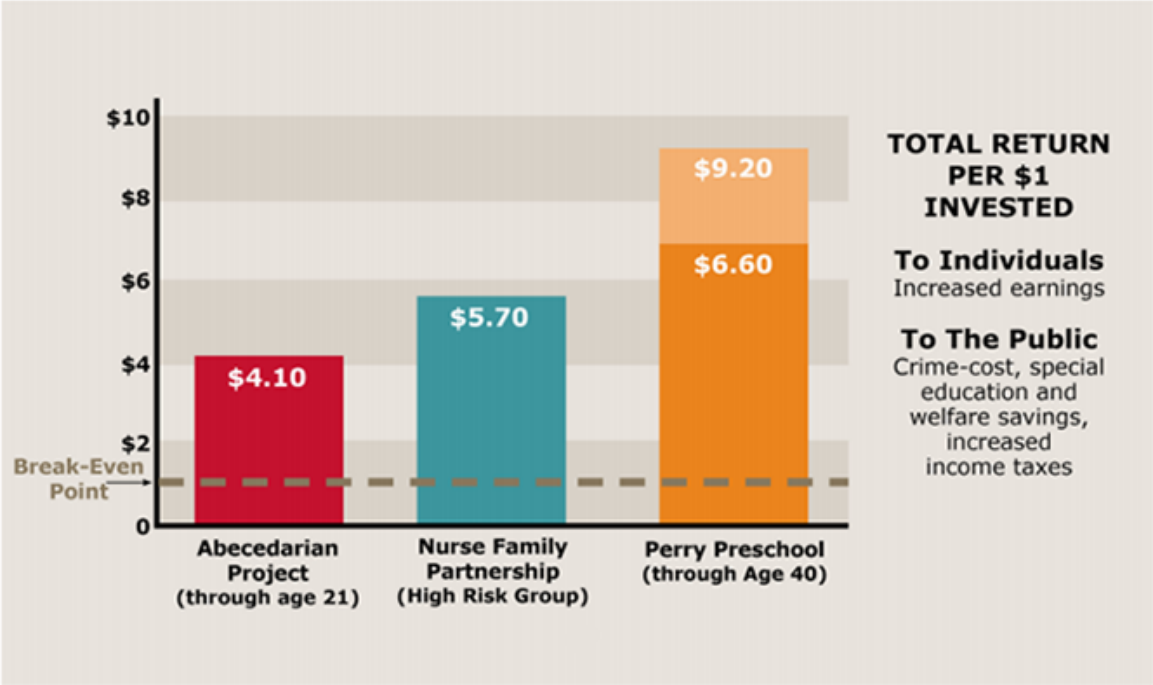
The needs described above provide a local illustration of a national story: current levels of state and federal funding for early care and education are woefully inadequate for serving the needs of families and communities, essential for building a strong and vibrant citizenry and a healthy economy.

Six decades of research findings consistently document the reality that prioritizing early care and education for all children, while expensive in the short-term, is far more humane and significantly less costly than the alternatives that many of these children will experience in later years *because* they lacked access to high quality care and education in their earliest years. Unfortunately, rather than paying less for universal, high quality care and education for children birth to five, we are instead choosing significantly more expensive "fixes" at multiple levels to make up for the grossly unequal starts in life

that American children from different socioeconomic backgrounds receive. These too-little-too-late, costly, and less humane fixes include publicly funded remediation and special education, increased need for health and social services, low-paying jobs, and prisons (Palfrey, Hauser-Cram, Bronson, Warfield, Sirin, & Chan, 2005; Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

Figure 1 shows the startling economic impact of investing in early childhood education, as demonstrated by large, long-term, respected research studies on three high-quality early education programs. In this figure, everything above the break-even line is a return on each dollar invested, found in these studies to be anywhere from $3.10 to $8.20. This topic will be further addressed in a later section of this paper.

Figure 1: Total Return Per Dollar Invested in Early Education



(Five Numbers to Remember About Early Childhood Development, 2009, Number 5)

What is frustrating to early childhood scholars and other leaders in the field is the fact that decades of American research on the impact of high quality early care and education are being utilized to improve familial, community, and national health and well-being—but this is happening more outside than within the United States. As Rutenbeck's narrator in *The Raising of America* asks, "If research from our own country's experiments is inspiring governments around the world, why haven't we applied these lessons ourselves?" (Rutenbeck, 2013b, p. 9). To answer this question, we believe it is necessary to examine context before solutions can be identified. The following statements, explained in further detail below, summarize our understanding of the current context for early care and education in the United States:

1. Early care and education is viewed inaccurately—as lowly and as "women's work" that anyone can do—and as such it is not commonly understood as a profoundly significant profession requiring specialized, intensive study and extensive fieldwork.

2. In reality, early care and education is a well-researched, well-documented, uncontested essential for familial, community, and national health and economic well-being.

3. Given #1 and #2 above, it would be logical for college campuses to take the lead in making use of current research findings on best practices in early care and education and conducting additional research through university lab schools for early childhood studies. Although such centers on college campuses serve significant needs at multiple levels, fewer and fewer are being funded on college campuses across the nation.

Context Issue 1: The Problem with "Women's Work"

Societal attitudes and priorities—particularly related to gender norms—help explain the lack of adequate early care and education services, particularly for children in poverty. Simply put, caring for children is considered "women's work" and, thus, is under-valued in the United States. We base this claim on the following:

- Historically, the care of young children worldwide has been primarily done by women.

- 97.2% of the teaching workforce in preschool and kindergarten is female (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

- The national median annual salary for a preschool teacher (defined as one who teaches children in their years prior to kindergarten) is $28,120, or $13.52 per hour. Annual earnings of $28,120 compare poorly to the also-unimpressive median salary of $53,760 for kindergarten and elementary school teachers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

- To be a preschool teacher, the typical entry-level education required is an associate's degree, with no required work experience in a related occupation and typically no on-the-job training (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

- Colleges commonly offer associate's and bachelor's degrees in early childhood, but just as commonly fail to offer laboratory learning experiences comparable to those available in other fields (e.g., STEM disciplines, nursing). In fact, campus-based child care services themselves—much less laboratory school opportunities for students in early childhood—are declining, despite sharply growing numbers of college students with children (Eckerson, Talbourdet, Reichlin, Sykes, Noll, & Gault, 2016). From 2005 to 2015, the percentage of public 2-year colleges in the United States that offer this service has declined from 53% to 44%; the percentage of public 4-year colleges doing so has declined from 55% to 49% (2016).

The inconsistent availability of laboratory learning opportunities for early childhood students in college and the extraordinarily low pay for early childhood professionals are inequities impacting an overwhelmingly female workforce. Given decades of research findings indicating that familial, community, and national health and economic well-being are highly correlated with access to high

quality early care and education (Elango, García, Heckman, & Hojman, 2015; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000; Park, Ferretti, & Ames, 2012), much is at stake when the care and education of young children is consistently and pervasively undervalued.

Context Issue 2: Research Findings on the Impact of High Quality Early Care and Education

The benefits of high quality early care and education are firmly established, numerous, and significant. Many studies support this claim (e.g., Business & Community Leaders Alliance of Ventura County, 2013; Calman & Tarr-Whelan, 2005; Campbell et al., n.d.; First Five Years Fund, n.d.; Elango, Garcia, Heckman, & Hojman, 2015; Heckman Equation, n.d.; Rutenbeck, 2013a; Schweinhart, et al., 2005). Educators, neuroscientists, sociologists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, doctors, and other community leaders agree that children who experience high quality education in their first five years are:

- more school ready;
- less likely to need special education services;
- more likely to graduate and live healthy lives (e.g., avoiding teen pregnancy, obesity, smoking, and depression);
- less likely to be arrested;
- less likely to be on welfare;
- more likely to develop higher intelligence and character;
- better prepared to enter the workforce and be productive citizens, have higher-paying jobs, and contribute more in taxes; and
- better able to persist and solve problems collaboratively.

James Heckman, Nobel Prize-winning economist, analyzed the economic impact of these well-documented outcomes and found a 7-10% return on investment per child per annum (Heckman Equation, n.d.; Rutenbeck, 2013a). This high rate of return is explained by a reduced need for publicly funded services (e.g., special education; welfare, public health and other social services; criminal convictions and imprisonment) and an increase in civic competence and economic productivity for a greater share of the population. It is important to note that these benefits are broadly enjoyed across social and economic spectrums, lessening rather than contributing to the unequal distribution of wealth in the United States.

Provision of high quality early care and education for all children is an expensive initial proposition, with an estimated cost of $50 billion to serve just the 3- and 4-year olds in the nation (Calman & Tarr-Whelan, 2005). However, economists project that this investment “would create over $213 billion in value, for a net gain of $163 billion” (p. 19) over the next 40 years. Findings from the High Scope Perry Preschool Study support these projections. A two-year investment of $15,166 per child in high quality early care and education saved the public approximately $200,000 per individual forty years later, as

that child grew up better able to contribute to society rather than require continued supports from it (p. 13). As the Perry Preschoolers continue to age beyond their mid-40s, we can assume the return on the original investment will increase beyond $200,000 as they enter their peak earning years and move more healthily into old age.

This scale of public investment is daunting, but we know it is possible; the people of Finland are doing it. While we acknowledge the criticisms commonly lodged when Finland's educational reform story is invoked in the United States (e.g., there is less diversity in the Finnish population and therefore less educational complexity than exists here; higher tax rates and a socialist approach to funding and providing public services invalidates any economically-based comparison between our two countries; Finland's population is much smaller than ours), we cannot afford the arrogance required to throw actual babies out with this proverbial bathwater. In anticipation of these criticisms, we offer a counter observation. Dramatic educational and social achievements occurred over a 45-year period in Finland because leaders recognized a need for improvement, implemented research-based strategies for reform, and had the will to sustain those focused reforms over decades—all with the long game in mind from the beginning. There is much to learn from their experience, despite obvious differences in context.

In 1972, the Finns were unhappy with their educational system's mediocre performance relative to other nations, and they decided to do what was necessary to improve it (Hattie, 2012; Partanen, 2011; Sahlberg, 2011). A wave of immigration in the seventies from eastern European countries and refugee and asylum seekers from Latin America and Vietnam increased the diversity and number of non-Finnish speaking citizens (Korkiasaari & Soderling, 2010). In stark contrast to educational reform approaches of the past several decades in the United States, the explicit Finnish approach at that time was to ignore the topic of academic achievement until they got equity right (Sahlberg, 2011). One initial strategy toward this end was to emphasize and invest in early childhood education, resulting in two realities that would be hard to imagine for American parents: In Finland, the cost of private day care is reimbursed, and there is publicly financed support for all types of childcare (Hiilamo, 2002; Anttonen, 1999). Some outcomes of this decades-old decision to invest in early childhood education are that preschool and primary teachers are required to have an advanced degree, they are well-paid, and they are highly respected, autonomous, societally-important professionals. In this largely rural country, Finland enacted legislation to provide childcare and preschool education for every child of working parents through municipally funded care (Child Day Care Act, n.d.; Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Finland, 2000). These and other educational reforms are credited with the fact that Finland places highly on international comparisons of social, educational, and economic health. They didn't, in 1972 (personal communication, P. Sahlberg, November 15, 2012).

The top ten countries whose children score the highest educationally all share common educational practices, including highly qualified teachers, equal opportunities for all students, strong early intervention programs, and social support for children and families (Morgan, 2014). If the United States were to make a more significant commitment to support children and families, specifically in the form of universal access to high quality pre-kindergarten programs, Lynch and Vaghul (2015) report that it would take 16 years for resulting benefits to exceed the costs, with benefits nearly doubling the cost in 33 years (see Figure 2).

Figure 2:

Government Costs and Benefits From a Universal U.S. Prekindergarten Program

It would take just 16 years for the government annual budget benefits to exceed the costs.

Additional taxpayer cost when fully phased in 2017	**$26 billion**
Government budget surplus in 2050	**$47.2 billion**
Ratio of government budget benefits to costs in 2050	**2.37 to 1**

Note: All monetary values are in 2014 dollars.
Source: Authors' analysis.

Equitable Growth

(Lynch & Vaghul, 2015, Figure 2)

Context Issue 3: Early Care and Education Centers Are Needed on College Campuses

High quality early care and education centers on college campuses serve significant needs at multiple levels, including: (1) increasing the number of spaces available in a community to serve young children and helping those children to build a strong developmental foundation for learning; (2) facilitating access to and graduation from postsecondary education for parents, particularly for low-income parents; (3) providing authentic teaching spaces and learning experiences for college faculty and students in education and other social sciences; and (4) providing opportunities for conducting and using research to inform the field and enhance professional development for practitioners in the early childhood workforce. Investing in this single strategy yields these immediate benefits in addition to a number of long-term social and economic benefits realized by families, communities, states, and the nation.

A study at Monroe Community College (MCC) in New York State (cited in Noll, Reichlin, & Gault, 2017) underscores the importance of childcare for student parents:

> MCC students with children under the age of six who used the campus child care center were more likely to return to school the following year than their counterparts who did not use the child care center... Parents who used child care were also nearly three times more likely to graduate or go on to pursue a B.A. within 3 years of enrollment. (p. 13)

Federal and state governments must take the lead in funding early care and education centers at colleges and universities. The federal government recognizes the importance of supporting low-income student-parents' childcare needs, with a $15.1 million dollar annual investment in the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). While designed to assist low-income student-parents by partially subsidizing child care so that they can complete their college program and graduate in a timely manner, the program partially funds only a small fraction (3%) of campus-based childcare centers nationally. Between 2001-2014, program funding decreased from $25 million on 307 campuses to $15.1 million on 86 campuses (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Conclusion

> *We do not have a money problem in America; we have a profound values and priorities problem.* (Edelman, 2008, p. 8)

Resources are not lacking but our national values and priorities are. Donna Kerr, writing about teacher education in the United States in the early 1980s, drew similar comparisons that are, sadly, as relevant to our topic and time as they were to her research 30 years ago. Kerr stated:

> By design and by default this country has chosen to turn disease, disputes, and war into profitable career fields. At the same time, it has made most unattractive the activity of educating our young. The question is not whether resources should be dedicated to the maintenance of health, domestic tranquility and international peace. Rather, the question is whether any society can afford to make their opposites profitable and to do so at the expense of education. (1983, p. 146)

Such is the enormity of the problem. Imagine the culture shift required to make careers in serving children as profitable as many of those serving the pathologies of disease and war. We believe this is a culture shift worth imagining and striving for, on our campus at CSU Channel Islands and in regional, state, and national contexts.

In the long term, high quality early care and education is irrefutably cost effective. However, since the benefits accrue to children, to families, to communities, and to society as a whole—rather than to individual investors—private investment in early care and education is unattractive from a capitalistic perspective. What is needed is vision and a sincere, sustained commitment to this topic from local, state, and federal policy makers. Therefore, federal and state governments must take the lead in funding early care and education centers at colleges and universities.

Our initial project several years ago was to understand the scope of need for an early care and education center on our campus. We have learned so much more. Until citizens unite to support university, state, and federal funding of early care and education initiatives, the burden of caring for children will continue to fall disproportionately on the shoulders of women.

We call for united action that goes beyond new programs in our schools for three- and four-year-old children. We call for early care and education programs that are affordable for families, allowing parents the option of working or attending post secondary educational programs. We call for colleges and universities to build and support early care and education centers on or near campus to serve student parents and students who are studying children's growth and development. It bodes well for the future of children and for the nation that many of America's leaders in male-dominated professions are at long last joining with early childhood educators to call for expanded access to early care and education. They are aspiring, finally, to the "women's work" of caring for and raising successful citizens. This essential undertaking requires, among other things, our collective will to support all of America's children, our commitment to fund high quality early care and education, and our shared appreciation for this work in building a stable, just, and prosperous future.

About the Authors

Adria Taha-Resnick is faculty at California State University, Channel Islands. She has 25 years of experience in early care and education working as a teacher, administrator, and trainer and currently teaches future teachers. In addition to teaching, Adria is the Vice President for the California Association for the Education of Young Children, and Chair of the Ventura County Local Planning Council. Her interests include quality initiatives and building leadership in early care and education.

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